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ABSTRACT

An adaptation of the Foreign Service Institute's (FSI) oral interview test for oral language proficiency developed for use at the American Institute of Musical Studies' (AIMS) summer vocal institute in Austria to determine students' improvement in German language is discussed. The reasons for its selection over other major comparable tests are outlined. The FSI weighting system and five categories of proficiency are retained in the AIMS version. However, the point system of the pronunciation category is reversed to avoid penalizing candidates for good pronunciation, and the rating scale is abbreviated because of the limited proficiency needs of the AIMS students. Each student is tested before and after the German language course by two testers other than his own teachers. Over 1,000 students have been tested thus far. The average improvement in functional conversational language during the course includes a seven point increase in levels I and II, a six point increase in levels III and IV, and a five point increase in level V. This adaptation is suggested to be a suitable alternative to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages and Educational Testing Service oral proficiency test in special circumstances such as these. (MSE)

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ORAL PROFICIENCY TESTING IN SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES: A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE

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Abstract: Numerous purposes exist for establishing a learner's functional foreign language oral proficiency. This may be accomplished by using one of a variety of speaking tests, of which the ACTFL/ETS Oral Proficiency Test is the most recent and the most comprehensive curriculum-free test. However, some special programs must evaluate oral proficiency but do not have adequate numbers of ACTFL-trained testers available when they are needed. For these special circumstances, I recommend another similar oral proficiency test, which has been used with good results for four years on over 1,000 students. This article describes the details of this test.

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ORAL PROFICIENCY TESTING IN SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES: A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE[1]

Proficiency testing has become a popular discussion topic over the past few years, as evidenced by the 1983 Joint Annual Meeting of AATG and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) in San Francisco: at least twelve sessions devoted totally or in part to this topic were listed on the conference program. Several preconference workshops also focused on proficiency testing.

This development is not really surprising, since accountability in education seems to have become a national issue, as indicated by the number of professional and layman's groups that have addressed the subject and the number of articles and reports published on it. More to the point, ACTFL and the Educational Testing Service (ETS) have, during the past three years, been doing yeoman's work in the area of foreign language proficiency with two major, federally funded projects: the generic and language-specific Proficiency Guideline Project in French, German, and Spanish, which recently was expanded to include also Russian, Arabic, and Chinese; and the intensive Tester-Training Workshop Project in French, German, Italian, and Spanish. The former has resulted in the ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines for French, German, and Spanish, a publication that is currently being revised,[2] while the latter has spawned a number of similar tester-training projects, either federally or state funded or self-supporting, in several states.[3]

I do not want to discuss here the details of either of these projects, which I strongly support, because other contributors to this special UP issue speak directly to that point. What I should like to do is to identify briefly the primary purposes of proficiency testing, then discuss several types of oral proficiency tests besides the ACTFL/ETS test that are currently in use, and finally describe in detail a specific alternate oral proficiency testing program that, although similar to the ACTFL/ETS test, precedes it in time and may meet the needs of a number of special foreign language programs in which the use of trained ACTFL/ETS testers is not feasible at this time.

Types of Oral Proficiency Tests

Many situations and circumstances exist, of course, in which it becomes important to establish the oral proficiency of a candidate or a student. Figure 1 identifies some of these. The question is: how can we best go about determining a person's oral proficiency accurately? Several practices are currently in use. One is the "describe- or talk-about-the-picture" technique, for which any of the following four items could serve as a visual stimulus (Figure 2).

The problem with Figure 2A is that, although the candidate's vocabulary may be adequate for him to describe the picture, what does the tester learn about his global language proficiency? He would not have to use any but the most simple grammatical constructions to complete the task, and he never has to use any other tense

than the present. The same criticism must be voiced with regard to Figure 2B, although the picture is more complex, featuring several activities that take place simultaneously. This picture, therefore, will elicit a wider range of vocabulary from the candidate than the first one, possibly even more sophisticated sentence structures, but still only one tense, the present. Figure 2C is more structured and narrative in nature: it tells a story that is narrowly focused. The individual frames may even challenge the candidate to go beyond mere description and create in the target language, but once again he does not need to use any tense but the present to complete the task.

Figure 2D presents the candidate with a situational problem in context. This picture may elicit the widest range of vocabulary and structure, but still only the present tense. The task the candidate is to complete could be stated to him in these words:

> Sie sind die Person im gestreiften Anzug. Ihr Zug fährt um 10:15 Uhr ab, aber Sie dürfen nicht ohne Fahrkarte in den Zug einsteigen. Erklären Sie Ihre dringliche Lage der Frau, die gerade am Schalter steht.

All four of the preceding items may be suitable to establish lower level proficiencies, perhaps at the conclusion of an instructional sequence or short-term program, possibly even in foreign language contest situations. The fundamental problem with all four items, however, is that none of them tests functional language proficiency in any meaningful way, although the last item moves

slightly in that direction.

The oral portion of the Goethe Institute's "Zertifikat Deutsch als Fremdsprache", on the other hand, attempts to be functionally oriented. For example, it presents the candidate with an item similar to the following:[4]

> Sagen Sie uns bitte ganz kurz, was Sie in dieser Situationen sagen, fragen, oder antworten würden.
>
> 1. Auf dem Einwohnermeldeamt werden Sie gefragt, seit wann Sie schon in Deutschland sind. Bitte antworten Sie.
> 2. Sie wollen ein Paket in Ihre Heimat schicken. Fragen Sie auf dem Postamt nach dem Porto.
> 3. Sie kommen sehr hungrig in ein Restaurant. Es ist aber schon sehr spät abends. Was fragen Sie den Kellner?
> 4. Sie haben ein Hemd für DM 40,- gekauft und bezahlen mit einem Hundertmarkschein. Der Verkäufer gibt Ihnen zu wenig zurück. Was sagen Sie?
> 5. Sie sehen eine Frau mit einem Kinderwagen. Mit grosser Mühe versucht sie, in die Strassenbahn einzusteigen. Was sagen Sie zu ihr?

The time allocated for this item of five questions is five minutes.

Unfortunately, each of these situations is tailored to elicit only a brief phrase from the candidate. On that basis alone it would be extremely difficult to determine the candidate's global, functional foreign language proficiency. Consequently, this situationally

oriented task of the "Zertifikatsprüfung" is followed by a directed conversation of ten minutes' duration, during which the candidate might have a better chance to demonstrate his functional language proficiency. First, he is given a choice of three topics from which he may select the one he likes best. Then he is given twenty minutes to prepare himself on his chosen topic for the ten-minute directed conversation. Let us assume the candidate chose the topic "travel" from among the choices offered him. Here are the kinds of questions he might expect to be asked during this portion of the "Zertifikatsprüfung".

Gelenktes Gespräch[5]

1. Haben Sie schon einmal eine grössere Reise gemacht? -- Wohin?
2. Wie haben Sie diese Reise vorbereitet? -- Alternativ Frage: Wie sollte man nach Ihrer Meinung eine grössere Reise vorbereiten?
3. Was erwarten Sie von einer Urlaubsreise?
4. In welcher Jahreszeit reisen Sie am liebsten? -- Warum?
5. Reisen Sie lieber allein oder in einer Gruppe? -- Warum?
6. Wohin möchten Sie am liebsten reisen? -- Warum?
7. Mit welchen Verkehrsmitteln reist man Ihrer Meinung nach am angenehmsten? -- Warum?
8. Können Sie einem Ausländer eine Reise in Ihre Heimat

empfehlen? -- Warum?/Warum nicht?

This testing technique, although popular among many foreign language teachers, is also somewhat flawed as a means of determining accurately a candidate's functional foreign language proficiency. The topic of the conversation is predetermined and thus limited, which gives the conversation a forced, slightly artificial character, not a spontaneous one. With the candidate exercising a limited choice over the conversational topic and being given ample time to prepare himself for the ten-minute conversation, this testing format seems less than ideal for establishing the functional language proficiency of the candidate. However, it should be noted that the eight questions become progressively more difficult to answer, with the final questions designed to elicit supported opinions from the candidate, a more advanced task than mere description. Of course, each question can also be answered with very short sentences and phrases.

A slight improvement over the previous test item is the next one. It is representative of the type of item a candidate might encounter if he takes the Goethe Institute's "Mittelstufenprüfung". Again, the candidate is given a choice of three topics and asked to prepare his argumentation in advance. The specific instructions read as follows:[6]

> Führen Sie mit Ihrem Prüfer ein Gespräch, in dessen Verlauf Sie auf Fragen, Einwände, Vorschläge und Kommentare

des Prüfers eingehen sollen. Versuchen Sie, Ihre Absicht durchzusetzen oder Ihre Meinung zur Geltung zu bringen!

Here are the three topics from which the candidate may choose.

1. Sie sehen, dass Ihr Prüfer krank ist.
   Fragen Sie ihn, welche Krankheit er hat und sagen Sie, was Sie dagegen zu tun empfehlen.
2. Sie möchten gern gewählt werden als Vorsitzender einer politischen Partei/eines Clubs/einer Interessengemeinschaft, als Kurssprecher etc.
   Schildern Sie, wie Sie Ihren Aufgabenbereich sehen und überzeugen Sie Ihren Lehrer von Ihrer Eignung für dieses Amt.
3. Sie finden, dass Ihr Lehrer sich unhöflich benommen hat.
   Weisen Sie ihn zurecht und machen Sie ihn auf die Konsequenzen aufmerksam, die sein Verhalten haben könnte.

Unfortunately, only the second topic is actually suitable for most American high school and college students. The third topic, in particular, is totally unsuitable ror a conversation under any circumstance, especially in a test situation.

None of the techniques described so far is really suited to elicit from a candidate a ratable speech sample that is broad and varied enough to asses accurately his functional proficiency in the target language. For that purpose, the most suitable technique is still the

Oral Interview (OI), developed nearly 30 years ago by the United States Foreign Service Institute (FSI) to test the functional foreign language skills of its foreign service officers. Today, the OI is used by practically all federal agencies, among them the Defense Language Institute (DLI) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Over the years, the former FSI Interview has become known as the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) Oral Interview. More recently, it was adapted by, and forms the basis of, the two ACTFL/ETS Proficiency Projects I mentioned earlier.

It was the format of this test, the FSI Interview, that my colleagues and I at the University of Houston adapted in 1977 to meet our specific proficiency testing needs.[7] At that time a group of our students were completing Phase I of an experimental, two-semester, professional-field-oriented foreign language program for majors in the College of Hotel and Restaurant Management. Before we could send them on to Phase II, a ten-week practicum working, for pay, in guest-contact positions in Germany, we needed to determine their levels of oral proficiency.

From that beginning, our use of the OI in our instructional program has grown steadily. We have used it for student placement, as part of our departmental credit-by-examination procedure, for determining the qualifications of graduate students for teaching assistantships, and to assess the oral proficiency in German of applicants to our graduate program. In addition, we administer the OI to every student in our undergraduate teacher education program before he

goes out to student teach. And finally, we now use the OI in two other professional-field-oriented foreign language programs, one in music and the other in business administration.[8] In these programs, we use the OI as an entry and an exit test to determine the degree of improvement that has taken place in the functional language proficiency of the students over a two-semester period. In all of these programs, we are gradually replacing our own evaluation techniques and criteria with those developed by ACTFL in its Proficiency Projects.

The AIMS Oral Proficiency Test

However, there are times, programs, and circumstances where the use of ACTFL-recommended procedures is not possible, either because ACTFL-trained testers in sufficient numbers are not available when needed or because of the particular nature of a given program. Here is one such situation.

In 1979 I became associated with the American Institute of Musical Studies (AIMS), which each year operates a Summer Vocal Institute in Graz, Austria. It is a kind of finishing school for singers and instrumentalists, most of them Americans, who have hopes of singing or playing in one of the more than seventy-five opera houses that exist in German-speaking countries. Of the nearly 240 students attending the Vocal Institute in Graz each summer (170 singers and 70 instrumentalists), slightly more than 200 take German in addition to their musical studies, which are primary for

them. The institute offers instruction in German at four different levels, corresponding roughly to the first five semesters of German at an American university.

Since 1980, we have been using at Graz the adapted oral interview technique and evaluation procedure that my colleagues and I had developed in the United States three years earlier. Before that time the institute had been unable to determine the functional German language proficiency of the students at the conclusion of the instructional language program, something it had wanted to know.

We administer the OI twice at Graz, first to determine the entry level of each student and second, at the conclusion of the language program, to determine the student's exit level. Since the German faculty in that program varies from year to year, and since the time available to train faculty testers/raters is extremely limited, I have adapted the FSI's rating scale to meet specific program needs (Table 1).

Those familiar with the FSI scale will notice that we have retained the FSI weighting system and the five categories. These components of the test evaluation system have been reliably established as a means of determining functional language proficiency through repeated in-house studies at the FSI over the past 25 years. However, we have reversed the point system of the first category (pronunciation), since it makes little sense to penalize a candidate for good pronunciation, whatever the philosophical merit of the argument, and have abbreviated the entire rating scale, because in the Graz program we hardly ever have to test students whose proficiency level is

beyond that of the FSI level rating of 2+.[9]

Every oral proficiency test in Graz is conducted by two testers, so as to obtain the most objective rating possible. One of the faculty members conducts the interview and the other only occasionally functions as an active participant. Each tester independently fills out his rating slip (Figure 3), but both testers must agree on the final score to be assigned to each candidate's performance. No faculty member may test his own students.

Between 1980 and the end of the summer of 1984, we will have tested over 1,000 students in Graz. Because we administer the test twice, once at the beginning and once at the conclusion of the language program, we have been able to develop some interesting statistics about the average improvement in functional spoken German that students who are immersed in the target language can be expected to make during the period of instruction. For example, students in Levels I and II are able to improve their score by an average of seven points, students in Levels III and IV by an average of six points, and students in Level V, of whom we see few in Graz, by an average of five points.

This can be illustrated on an inverted pyramid (Figure 4). In order to progress from one level to the next, the student must master progressively more material at each successive stage. This visual representation can be compared with an ice cream cone: at the top, one encounters a greater quantity of the delicious confection than at the pointed bottom. The learner's progress at each level is

reflected in Tables 2A and 2B, which show the range of points for each of the five levels of proficiency at both program entry and exit.

A numerical scale, interesting as it may be, is essentially meaningless, however, unless backed up and explained by an articulated scale. We have developed one for the AIMS program that describes a candidate's performance at each level of proficiency. The detailed descriptions for each level are appended to this article. Let us look here only at one of the five level descriptions, that of a candidate at Exit Level 3.

> Candidate seldom makes major pronunciation errors, but his frequent minor errors hamper understanding; his accent is still decidedly foreign and requires highly concentrated listening; his grammatical errors are consistent enough to be categorized (auxiliary verbs in perfect tenses, past participial forms of verbs, word order, proper use of conjunctions, etc.); his range of vocabulary allows him to talk with confidence about himself, his family, his plans, and other people, make introductions, discuss in simple language major events, describe medical needs to a nurse or pharmacist in simple terms, arrange a meeting with someone, and communicate to a service station attendant routine maintenance instructions for his car; his speech is sometimes jerky, often hesitant; occasionally sentences may be left uncompleted; however, he understands quite well somewhat below-normal-rate speech that has been slightly simplified for his benefit, but he requires

some repetition and rephrasing of statements.

Those readers familiar with the FSI level descriptions will notice some similarities between them and the ones used in the AIMS program. These similarities are not accidental. On the contrary: we used the well-tested FSI level descriptions in 1979 as the model and basis for developing those for our program. Since ACTFL went to the same source when it developed its proficiency guidelines, it may be instructive to attempt an approximate comparison of the proficiency levels in the three types of oral proficiency testing programs referred to in this article: AIMS, ACTFL/ETS, and ILR (Table 3).

Because of severe time constraints in the AIMS program, we primarily use calibrated tapes to train the faculty involved in oral proficiency testing at Graz; instruction occurs in a special training session before each of the two testing periods. Conducting each test with two examiners may slow down the testing program, but it assures greater test reliability, since the testers rate each candidate's performance independently and must discuss and agree on their rating before they go on to examine the next candidate.

Conclusion

While it is hoped that the testing and evaluation procedures developed by ACTFL in its Proficiency Projects will become widely accepted and used in the profession, we recognize that there may

always be special programs, like the one in Graz, that are taught at times and in places when and where it is impossible to have available an adequate number of ACTFL-trained testers. The testing procedure described here is offered as a viable alternative in these circumstances. This test, with its built-in safeguards of frequent retraining, two testers, and rater agreement, is a close substitute for the ACTFL/ETS oral proficiency test and its evaluation procedures. We have found it to be a suitable model for determining, in special circumstances, the functional language proficiency of our students.

Notes

[1]This is a revised version of a paper presented at the AATG Annual Convention in San Francisco, November 1983.

[2]Anyone interested in obtaining a copy of the Guidelines should write the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 579 Broadway, Hastings-on-Hudson, NY 10706.

[3]To mention only three such projects: the Tester-Training Workshops currently being conducted in French, German and Spanish in Illinois and Texas (both federally funded) and the Tester-Training Workshop (self-supporting) conducted at Pomona College, California, in Fall 1983.

[4]Das Zertifikat Deutsch als Fremdsprache, 2nd edition, Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband and Goethe-Institut, eds. (Munich, 1977), p. 66.

[5]Ibid.

[6]From the descriptive literature about the Goethe Institute's "Mittelstufenprüfung."

[7]Reschke, Claus, "Adaptation of the FSI Interview Scale for Secondary Schools and Colleges", Direct Testing of Speaking Proficiency: Theory and Application, John L. D. Clark, ed. (Princeton: Educational Testing Service, 1978), pp. 77-88.

[8]Reschke, Claus, "Let's Increase, Not Reduce, Foreign Language Offerings", ADFL Bulletin, 9, No.4 (1978), pp. 41-44.

[9]The details of John Carroll's study of 1967, in which he established the fact that, nationally, language majors in French, German, Russian, and Spanish do not reach a level of proficiency beyond 2+ after four years of study, are by now well known. These results have not changed much during the intervening fifteen years. See John B. Carroll, Foreign Language Attainments of Language Majors in the Senior Year: A Survey Conducted in U.S. Colleges and Universities (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1967).

Appendix

AIMS Oral Proficiency Levels

LEVEL 1: Candidate's pronunciation is frequently either unintelligible or anglicized; his use of grammar is often incorrect, preventing effective communication; his vocabulary is extremely limited, but he is able to carry on, though very haltingly, the most simple and fragmentary conversation about himself and his family (telling time, naming simple after-school activities, talking about main meals, the size of his family, etc.); his speech is halting and consists primarily of individual words and simple phrases; he understands only very slowly spoken speech and often-repeated simple statements and questions.

LEVEL 2: Candidate frequently makes major pronunciation errors that impede understanding and require him to repeat his utterances; his rate of grammatical errors is high, but he has good control over two or three major grammatical patterns which he employs correctly with a fairly high degree of consistency, allowing him to communicate at a fairly simple level, although communication is frequently hampered by his errors; his vocabulary range, although still limited to the basic personal and social level (four to seven food items, three to four beverages, simple purchases, the departure times of trains, planes, buses, etc.), allows him to communicate very briefly, simply, and imperfectly on a variety of high-frequency topics (age,

simple family relationsh.. daily meals, ordering two or three simple meals in a restaurant, describing in simple terms some high-frequency activities performed around the home, describing in simple language a visit to the grocery store, the movies, theater, or concert, asking for and giving simple directions, etc.); his speech is slow and uneven, except for short, routine sentences and phrases; his understanding is slow, although he does understand very simple statements and questions about a variety of high-frequency situations he would be expected to encounter daily, socially or as a tourist, even though he may require frequent repetition and rephrasing of statements.

LEVEL 3: Candidate seldom makes major pronunciation errors, but his frequent minor errors hamper understanding; his accent is still decidedly foreign and requires highly concentrated listening; his grammatical errors are consistent enough to be categorized (auxiliary verbs in perfect tenses, past participial forms of verbs, word order, proper use of conjunctions, etc.); his range of vocabulary allows him to talk with confidence about himself, his family, his plans, and other people, make introductions, discuss in simple language major events, describe medical needs to a nurse or pharmacist in simple terms, arrange a meeting with someone, and communicate to a service station attendant routine maintenance instructions for his car; his speech is sometimes jerky, often hesitant; occasionally sentences may be left uncompleted; however, he understands quite

well somewhat below-normal-rate speech that has been slightly simplified for his benefit, but he requires some repetition and rephrasing of statements.

LEVEL 4: Candidate's accent is noticeably foreign; he makes few but consistent pronunciation erros that occasionally interfere with understanding; his infrequent grammatical errors show imperfect control of several grammatical patterns, but they seldom lead to serious misunderstandings; his vocabulary range allows him to express himself, using simple constructions and occasional circumlocutions, quite accurately and with some confidence on a number of topics, including current events as well as his daily routine, studies, trips, family activities, friends, his work, hobbies, and special interests; he is able to describe a person or place in some detail, can narrate a sequence of events, and ask in simple language for help when confronted with difficulties or complications in his studies or work; his speech is confident and only occasionally interrupted by groping for words; his comprehension of normal, educated speech is not perfect and requires the speaker occasionally to repeat or rephrase his sentence.

LEVEL 5: Candidate's accent, although recognizably foreign, and his mispronunciations, which are minor and random, rarely lead to misunderstandings; occasional grammatical errors are random; one, at most two, imperfectly controlled grammatical patterns lead to

consistent errors, which, however, have little effect on understanding; his vocabulary includes a number of professional terms that extend the range of topics he is able to talk about; his speech when talking about more specialized professional topics is hesitant and marked by frequent groping for the correct words, but he understands a native speaker of the target language well and fully comprehends most conversations of a nontechnical nature and some of a specialized, professional one.

Table 1. AIMS Rating Scale (Adapted from the FSI Scale)

Pronunciation (1)	Grammar (3)	Vocabulary (2)	Fluency (1)	Level of Content (2)	Total Points
0	0	0	0	0	0
1	3	2	1	2	9
2	6	4	2	4	18
3	9	6	3	6	27
4	12	8	4	8	36
5	15	10	5	10	45

Table 2. AIMS Evaluation/Rating Tables

A. Entry Level Proficiency

Class Level	Beginning I	Beginning II	Intermediate	Advanced
Entry oral evaluation points	0-9	10-19	20-29	30-36 37-40

B. Exit Level Proficienty

Proficiency Level	1	2	3	4	5
Exit oral evaluation points	5-16	17-24	25-31	32-38	39-45

Table 3. Proficiency Level Comparison

AIMS	ACTFL/ETS	ILR*
1	Novice low - Novice mid	0
2	Novice high - Intermediate low	0+
3	Intermediate low - Intermediate mid	1
4	Intermediate high - Advanced	1+ - 2
5	Advanced - Advanced plus	2 - 2+

*ILR = Interagency Language Roundtable

Figure Legends

Figure 1. Situations that require oral proficiency testing.

Figure 2. Visual stimuli for testing speaking ability. Reprinted with permission. 2A, Heinz Griessbach, Deutsch mit Erfolg 1 (München: Langenscheidt, 1983), p. 200; 2B, Gerd Neuner et al., Deutsch Activ 2 (München: Langenscheidt, 1981), p. ; 2C, Griessbach, op. cit., p. 204; 2D, M.L.A. Cooperative Foreign Language Proficiency Test, Form HA (Princeton, 1965).

Figure 3. Tester's rating form, AIMS language program.

Figure 4. As students advance upward to each successive level, they must master progressively more material.

Figure 1. Situations that require oral proficiency testing.

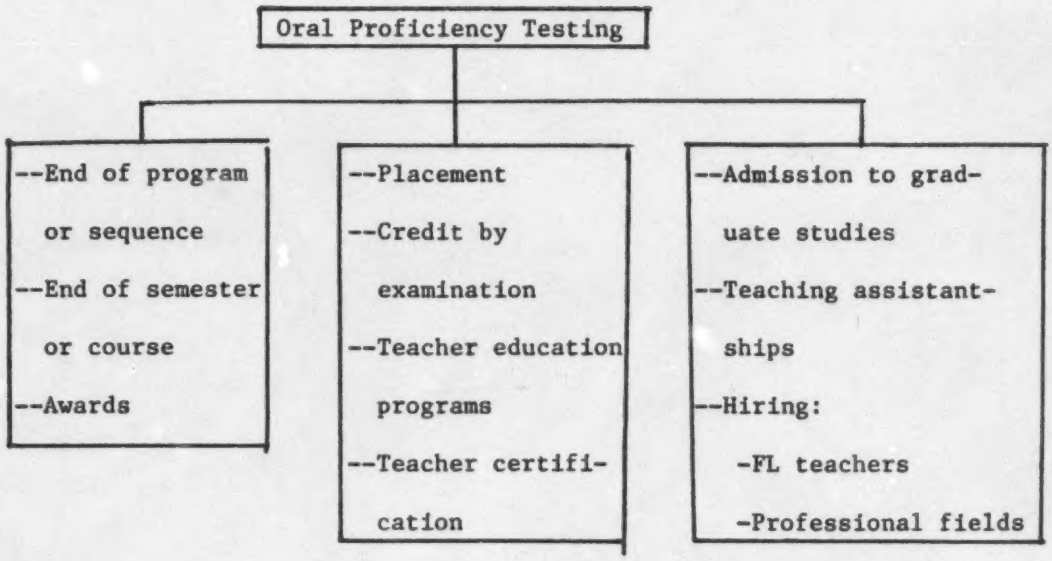


Figure 2A

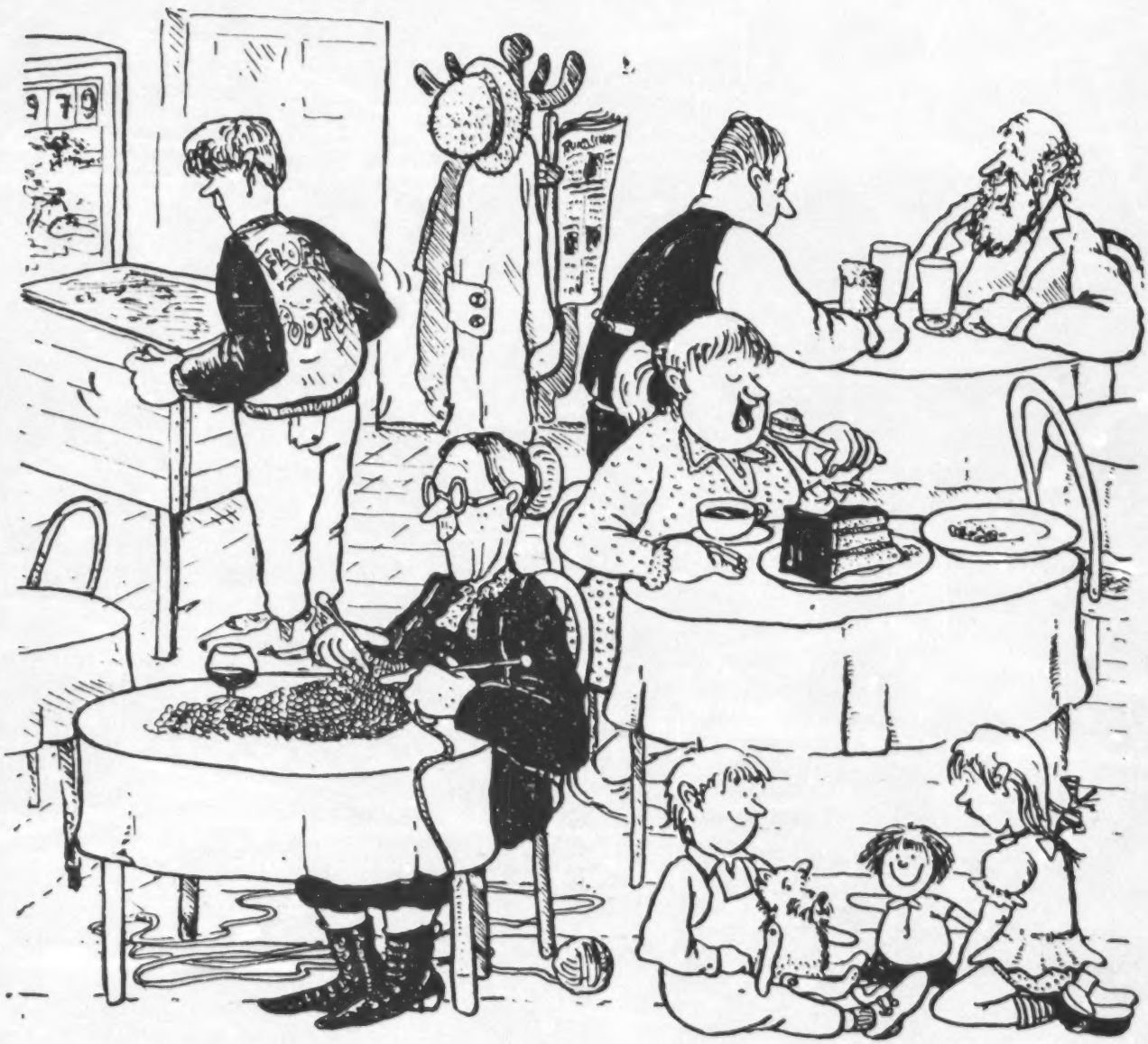
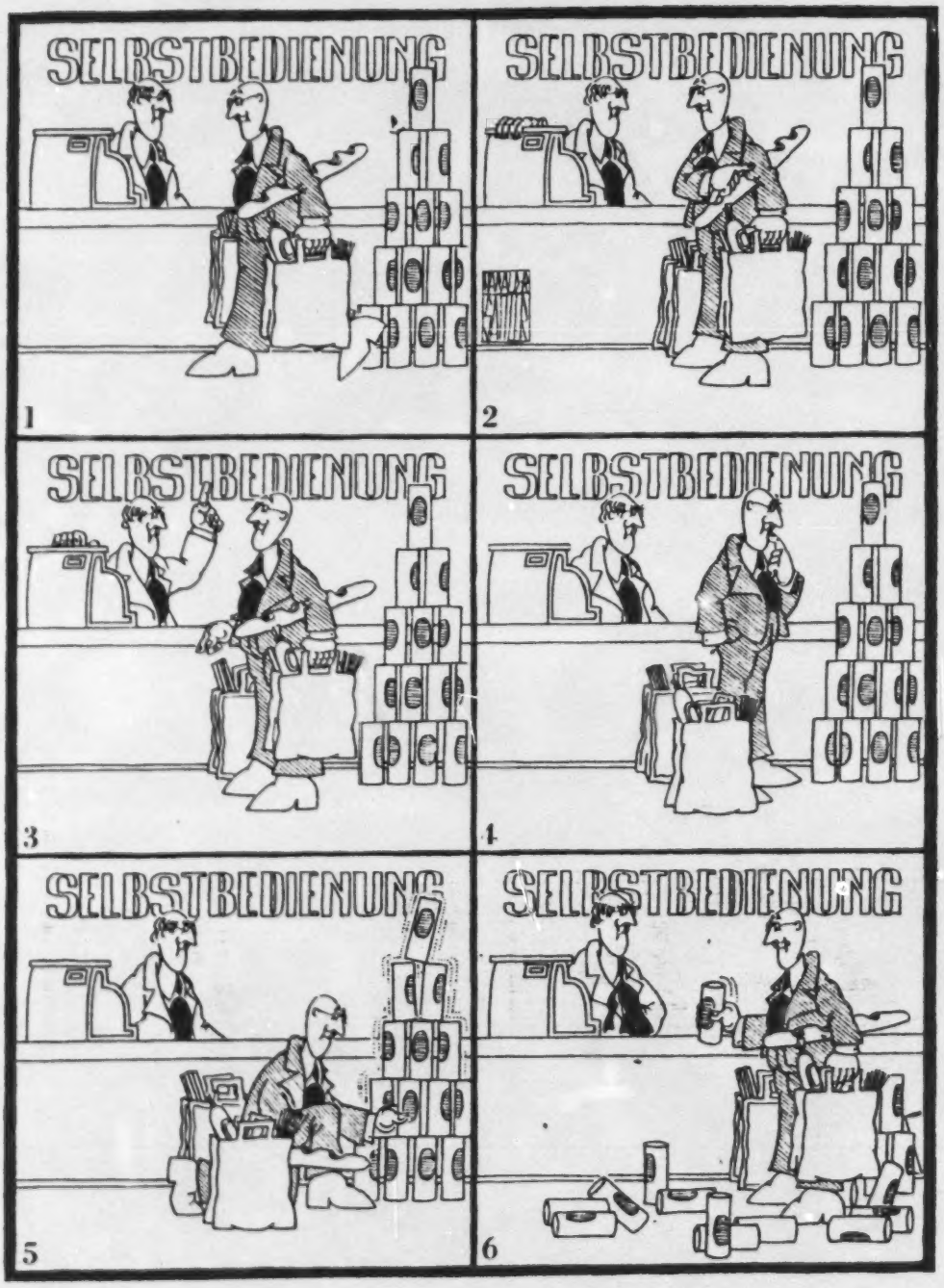


Figure 2B


SELBSTBEDIENUNG
1
SELBSTBEDIENUNG
2
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3
SELBSTBEDIENUNG
4
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5
SELBSTBEDIENUNG
6

Figure 2C

Figure 2D

Figure 3. Tester's rating form, AIMS language program

Name: _____

	0	1	2	3	4	5	Summe
I/A (1)							
Gram (3)							
VoK (2)							
R.Fl. (1)							
Inh. (2)							

Prüfer: _____ Gesamtpunktzahl: _____

_____ Level: _____

Figure 4. As students advance upward to each successive level, they must master progressively more material.